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General

TATE GALLERY
MILLBANK

# VASILY KANDINSKY

# 1866-1944

## SUPPLEMENT TO THE EXHIBITION CATALOGUE

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## SPECIAL LOAN OF PAINTINGS FROM THE U.S.S.R.

*Exhibition 63/1*
*"Vasily Kandinsky"*
*January 25 to April 7, 1963*

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In the catalogue that accompanies the Vasily Kandinsky exhibition, it was pointed out that the three principal reservoirs containing the artist's legacy have been combined for the first time in the current exhibition at The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum. The collections referred to are those of Madame Nina Kandinsky, the artist's widow, the Gabriele Münter Foundation of the Städtische Galerie in Munich, and The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York.

Only one additional source approaches those already mentioned in both quality and quantity and, until very recently, its participation in this most comprehensive Kandinsky tribute was in doubt. We are, of course, referring to the great Soviet museums, the Russian Museum in Leningrad, the Tretiakov Gallery in Moscow, and the Municipal Museum of Modern Western Art, Moscow, which became beneficiaries of gifts by the artist during his stay in the Soviet Union in the post-revolutionary years from 1917 to 1921.

After prolonged negotiations initiated in Moscow by Madame Kandinsky more than a year ago and pursued on various levels ever since, seven of Kandinsky's important works were promised and punctually delivered. They all date back to the crucial period between 1909 and 1913 in which Kandinsky's work underwent the great transformation from representational subject matter to non-objective form.

In the chronologically arranged exhibition at the Guggenheim Museum, these works from Russia are integrated in the established sequence. To record them and to mark the importance of the loan from so distant a source, this special supplement has been printed. Its value is greatly enhanced by two essays which do not appear in the main body of the Vasily Kandinsky catalogue. The first of these gives us an insight into the artist's human qualities as these are described to us by Nina Kandinsky. The second, a concise summary of Kandinsky's work, is furnished by Professor Will Grohmann, whose Kandinsky monograph is the most recent and fullest existing record in the field.

The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum must express its sincere gratitude to Madame Kandinsky and to Professor Grohmann in behalf of all the participating museums—the Musée National d'Art Moderne in Paris, the Gemeente Museum in The Hague, and the Kunsthalle in Basel—and acknowledges above all the generosity of the Soviet authorities who, for the first time, allowed the inclusion of their museum holdings in an exhibition organized by an American museum.

Thomas M. Messer, Director, The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum

By his manners, his dignity, and a natural elegance, Kandinsky charmed all who met him. He was called "The Prince" by his circle of friends and the title was fitting. There was nothing brusque about him; he seldom gestured and then only discreetly. His voice, calm and yet energetic, was soothing. He was always himself, without effort, with a firm and tranquil assurance. The nobility evidenced in the least of his actions won him the esteem and the attachment of those near him on whom he exercized a benevolent influence.

In his works, as in his life, drama resolved itself in light and in a hidden warmth. His pictures are hymns to joy, powerful aspirations to the fullness of existence, an exaltation of being. The inner necessity which dominated all his art like an absolute law gives it profundity and humanity.

Filled with a sense of justice, whenever humanly possible he came to the aid of his colleagues, his pupils, and all who appealed to him. He communicated his optimism, his faith, and a little of his force to them. This greatness of heart, this youthfulness of soul, made his pupils say, "he is the youngest of us all." Able to keep his serenity intact during even the most difficult moments, he saw the positive side in all things, so that he was able to bear them and even turn them to good. Tribulations did not shake him, and he took in his stride all those assigned to him by fate. He was equal to his destiny and faced it courageously. When a small child, he suffered the terrible experience of seeing his parents divorced. Kandinsky subsequently had many difficult years to go through, years which prevented him for a long time from finding a harmonious balance between his life and his creations. Only after the age of fifty was he able to develop freely. Furthermore, he did not lack for enemies. His personality, which dominated by its very dignity, his refusal of all compromise along the path which he had mapped out for himself, the revolution that he accomplished—perhaps the greatest that art has known—brought him attacks and violent slanderers. Even today they can still be found.

Three times Kandinsky had to rebuild his life. As a Russian subject, he was given 24 hours to leave Munich when war was declared in August, 1914. He returned to Moscow, the city he loved so passionately and of which he has written with so much emotion and poetry in his book *Rückblicke*.

In these pages he looks back with nostalgia to the past with which he had broken. The war and this precipitated return disrupted his life, and many months went by before he could start to work again. He felt the necessity of setting in order the dynamism which had enjoyed free rein in his previous works. The form, bursting out, showed him unknown possibilities; his lyricism transposed itself into more rigorous rhythms, brighter colors. In a letter dated November, 1916, Kandinsky wrote, "I feel suddenly that my old dream draws close to realization. This dream was to paint a great picture whose meaning must be the joy and happiness of life or of the universe. All at once, at last, I feel the harmonies of color and form which are the joy of this world."

His private life was also about to take another course. At this juncture of his existence, he knew happiness, he gained confidence and inner peace. The future seemed full of promise, but he had still to wait to see it fulfilled. In December, 1921, we left Moscow together to take up residence in Germany. A new period began in his work, the architectural phase, a change so unexpected that the critics and art-lovers, already accustomed to his dramatic juxtapositions, were bewildered. Kandinsky was always ahead of his time, always beyond that which others considered sufficient. He had to develop without regard for opinion, even if he were to be understood only much later.

Thus the years passed, and our life together took shape. It was a calm life, dedicated by him to work, which was divided between his duties as professor at the Bauhaus, his art, which absorbed him more and more, and the privacy of his home where friends had their place. Journeys, exhibitions in Germany and outside of Germany, sometimes led us far from the Bauhaus and Dessau. Kandinsky always returned with joy.

In 1933, however, he had to renounce all this and, abandoning Germany forever, we came to Paris. For the third time, Kandinsky started life once again, this time at Neuilly on the banks of the Seine. With his same childlike excitement, the same enthusiasm, the same courage, he took up his brushes and pursued his interrupted work. Free at last, relieved of the obligations to which he had given himself so completely, he wished only to paint. It is perhaps during this last period that his genius displayed its richest inspiration. It came as a second spring of forms and colors vying with each other in lightness and transparency, multiplying and renewing themselves with a fantasy, an imagination and a mysterious strangeness which astonishes and enchants.

Nevertheless, difficult years commenced; a new conflict menaced the world. Although the war affected him, he took refuge in painting. Even this tragedy could not darken his life.

At this time, Kandinsky was little known in Paris for he was not yet "Parisian." "Wait ten years," they would say to him, "afterwards, you will be one of us." His optimism did not abate, and in his eyes, his work was the only thing that mattered. He knew that the time would come and, indeed, was very close when his art would be fully appreciated and take its rightful place. Kandinsky possessed the wisdom which hurries nothing and he put his confidence in the future because he bore a steady image of it within himself. His personality, the charm which radiated from his presence, and a playful affability captivated those who approached him. Before the end of his life, he had become "one of us." And so he will remain forever.

The great art event of the Twentieth Century in Germany is *Der Blaue Reiter*, which took place in Munich between 1911 and 1912. Characteristically, it was no more a national matter than cubism had been in Paris. In both these instances, painters of several different nationalities participated, whereas, in contrast, *Die Brücke* in Dresden, and the *Fauves* in Paris relied exclusively upon German and French participants respectively.

The originators of *Der Blaue Reiter* and its only formal "members" were Vasily Kandinsky and Franz Marc. It was they who published the *Almanach Der Blaue Reiter* in 1912 and who arranged the two famous exhibitions, the first at Thannhauser in Arco-Palais (December 18, 1911 to January 1, 1912) the second, a graphic exhibition in the bookstore of Hans Goltz (February 12 to the beginning of March, 1912). Thus, Kandinsky and Marc were the source of the idea as well as those who executed the work. They were, simultaneously, the aggressors and the defenders, for the art represented by them gave rise to an art scandal without equal, a breach which heralded the end of official painting in Munich and the beginning of a new art era.

At that time, Franz Marc had not yet fully emerged as a painter, whereas Kandinsky had already participated in many national and international exhibitions—not only in Germany, but also in France and Russia. During the years of his preparation in Munich (1896-1900), he was obliged to come to grips with purely academic exercises as was Paul Klee, his fellow student in the class taught by Franz Stuck in 1900. Kandinsky's experience with Monet's painting, which goes back to 1895 in Moscow, was briefly forgotten only to reappear later during the Murnau period.

Between 1903 and 1908 Kandinsky travelled widely, both in his native country and abroad, to Venice, Holland, Tunis, Rapallo, Paris, Switzerland, and Berlin. He sought out the problematic aspects of art in the Western world, for what he saw in Munich seemed to him incidental and insufficient. His oil sketches painted between 1901 and 1907 are in the style of late impressionism and post-impressionism, but are more German than French, recalling in some instances the beginnings of the *Brücke* rather than those of the *Fauves*. His Rapallo work (1906) and those paintings done in St. Cloud (1906-07) are most mature and constitute the climax before the Murnau period.

In addition to these, from the same years date clearly romantic works, scenes of ladies in stylish costume, such as *Bright Air* (1902), or historicizing representations in a medieval mode such

as *Trysting Place* (1903), or *The Arrival of the Merchants* (1905)—a tempera on a black background. Kandinsky occasionally refers to these as colored drawings. A special group among these historicizing works is composed of various Russian motifs, *Troika*, *Panic*, and *Volga Song*, all completed in Sèvres (1906-07). In these works, in much the same way as in the works of Stravinsky, the spirit of Russian folk tales, legends, and songs, comes to life in personages and occurrences familiar to Kandinsky through the operas of Glinka and Rimsky-Korsakov. Because these works were executed with a dotted technique, they occasionally remind us of shimmering stone mosaics. These romantic paintings were dearer to Kandinsky than those in his impressionistic vein.

Also very Russian in spirit and drawing on folklore are about forty of his woodcuts, both colored and black and white, which were created between 1901 and 1908 with themes close to those of the romantic works. Kandinsky printed them himself. In 1904 a graphic portfolio entitled *Poems without Words* was published, followed in 1906 by a second portfolio, *Xylographies*, whose content showed a close relationship to the Russian motif. The influence of *art nouveau*, unavoidable at the turn of the century, may be observed in these early graphic works, particularly the poster for the *Phalanx* exhibition (the *Phalanx* artist group was created by Kandinsky) but also in works such as *Night* (1903) which are clearly aware of the *art nouveau* spirit. It must be remembered that through such artists as O. Eckmann and through such magazines as *Jugend* and *Simplizissimus*, Munich was then an outpost of the *art nouveau* style. Both Obrist and van de Velde knew Kandinsky personally. It is more surprising to note, in contrast, that works such as *Summer* (1903) show a certain relationship to the *Nabis*, Bonnard and Vuillard, with whom Kandinsky at that time was not acquainted.

It was not until 1908 that Kandinsky became completely himself, when he returned to Munich and, having acquired his second residence in Murnau in 1909, began to work. He switched from city to country, but retained his interest in observed subject matter. The years from 1908-1910 were transitional years during which most of his work tended toward landscape painting. However, they also witnessed the beginning of the "Improvisations" in 1909, and his first *Composition* in 1910. In other words, he commenced paintings of a more subjective nature. It is obvious that a rapid transformation took place in 1908 when, with seeming suddenness, his work became freer, more spiritual, and less dependent upon object and theme. The momentum continued and the passion of the Murnau paintings bespeaks the deep-seated sense of self-renewal experienced by the artist.

While generally referred to in terms of Fauvism, these paintings are neither Fauve nor Expressionist but, rather, command a style of their own which manifests itself in concept as well as in color. In them, Kandinsky's painting enters a musical phase: the psychological relationships of color tonalities and of "sounds" soften both outline and volume and lead toward the repression of the objective. A subject such as the *Church at Murnau*, which extends in numerous versions through these years, undergoes a gradual evolution from landscape to color composition and envelops the painter himself within its rich pattern of sound. Some motifs were turned into "Improvisations" and others became "Compositions," but Kandinsky did not by any means seek abstraction in a conscious

and deliberate manner until 1913. He painted both representational and non-representational works, even though the conviction grew within him that it was the absolute painting that the future would claim. Such works as *Blue Mountain* (1909) or *Painting with Archer* (1909) contain mere references to objective vision and, in his *Composition III* (1910), such references were omitted to leave the way open for the breakthrough that occurs in *Composition IV* (1911), a veritable climax. From here on, peak followed peak until the outbreak of World War I heralded the end of this glittering hour of the arts.

In that first *Blaue Reiter* exhibition there were no more than 43 paintings. Next to the works of Kandinsky hung those of Marc, August Macke, Henri Rousseau, Robert Delaunay, and other painters. Few people suspected that these paintings would be counted at a later date among the masterpieces of the century. With a modest exhibition catalogue came a preliminary announcement of the *Almanach Der Blaue Reiter*, in which attention was drawn to "symptoms of a new inner rebirth." There is no doubt that the text was written by Kandinsky, even though it was not signed, for it was always he who held the reins in his hand and his fellow pioneer Marc never would have thought of questioning the leadership of Kandinsky, his elder by fourteen years. On the contrary, it was Marc who defended him whenever incomprehension and hatred became Kandinsky's lot.

Marc spoke for all those who supported Kandinsky. In the magazine *Sturm*, he wrote, in 1913, to the effect that "Kandinsky's paintings would soon remove themselves into the shadow of timelessness to return resplendent like comets." In 1912, Klee expressed himself in the magazine *Alpen:* "The acuteness of his spirit assumes immediately productive forms with him . . . it is not the museums that illuminate him, but he who sheds his light upon them, and there is no earthly power that can reduce the value of his own spiritual world." The poet Hugo Ball in his autobiographical book entitled, *Flucht aus der Zeit* (1927), counts Kandinsky among the "prophets of rebirth." According to him, Kandinsky "by his mere presence assured to Munich pre-eminence among modern cities." The words *color* and *tone* were alive in Kandinsky in a state of rare unity, and it was his ultimate objective to realize art on such a level rather than merely to produce works.

Implicit in these words is the awareness that Kandinsky was pressing for a synthesis of the arts. This explains his efforts in the theater and in music *(Der gelbe Klang)*, his literary attempts *(Klänge*, 1913), and his collaboration with Arnold Schönberg who participated in the first exhibition of *Der Blaue Reiter* and whose *Harmonielehre* (1911) coincides in essential matters with Kandinsky's prophetic book, *On The Spiritual in Art* (1912). To return to Ball and Kandinsky's "ultimate objective": according to Ball, art for Kandinsky was not a time-conditioned concept of the creative toward nature but was, instead, a reflection of the beyond. He saw in a painting a "spiritually breathing subject through which it assumes a reality analagous to veritable existence."

In view of these facts, it appears irrelevant to catalogue possible influences to which Kandinsky may have been subject as of 1910. It is a pseudo-scientific undertaking which divides Kandinsky's artistic personality into his own and into borrowed components. History is made by

great men whose achievements invite participation by contemporaries. These men of genius remain themselves even when they borrow, and this fact does not diminish the fame of key personalities in a given circle. On the contrary, they are clearly projected by a clean distinctiveness and their merit, jointly earned and linked to an event jointly experienced, becomes all the more convincing.

The war dissolved artist groups, such as *Der Blaue Reiter*, which had been formed after 1900. Strictly speaking, the *Blaue Reiter* had never been a group but was, rather, a circle of friends at the time when Herwarth Walden exhibited members of *Der Sturm* with *Der Blaue Reiter* (March 12, 1912). He included at that time Alexej von Jawlensky, Marianne von Werefkin, Paul Klee, and Alfred Kubin and, in the *Herbstsalon* (1913), Lyonel Feininger as well, so that the misconception later arose that these were all members of *Der Blaue Reiter*. This is not so. However, *Der Sturm* did bridge the gap caused by the war and some of the friends met again at the Bauhaus, first in Weimar and then in Dessau; Klee joined on January 1, 1921, Kandinsky in the summer of 1922; and Feininger, in a way, could be considered a charter member.

The assumptions at the Bauhaus determining the work of the painters were quite different from those that had existed in Munich, for the Bauhaus was a school in which studies such as the creative process, architecture, and industrial design, were the core of the curriculum. Painters were active in workshops where they concerned themselves with the mastery of form and where they attempted to convey their awareness of form (an introduction to the elementary basis of artistic creation). This, however, did not deflect either Kandinsky or Klee from their work as painters, and their production during the Bauhaus years is monumental and no less intensive than it had been in Munich. Instead of a romantic outburst of a "cosmic act of creation," we are confronted with a cooler conception manifested in forms strictly geometrical or, at any rate, loosely ordered. The 1926 publication of Kandinsky's book *Point and Line to Plane* made it possible to jump to the conclusion that its author was a theoretician and a constructivist. Both conclusions are false, for Kandinsky did not establish a dogma. He concerned himself with elements and forces. So distant was he from the constructivist idea that he continued to use the adjective "romantic" in relation to his circular compositions of the 1920's.

The public did not take easily to Kandinsky's paintings of the Bauhaus period (1921-1933) for considerable discipline was required to absorb them. This discipline was comparable to the prerequisites necessary to understand the twelve-tone music of his friend Arnold Schönberg—music that chronologically coincided with Kandinsky's *Composition No. 8* (1923). Geometry becomes number, but number reverts into magic, as Thomas Mann characterized Schönberg's music in his novel *Faust*. Creative freedom always seeks protection in the objective and tends toward a dialectic reversal. Such freedom becomes aware of itself within imposed limits and realizes itself in law without, however, ceasing to be freedom. Organization is everything; nothing exists without it, least of all art. Such guiding thoughts characterize the position of Kandinsky, an artist who, during the war years in Moscow, never saw fit to follow the lead of the Russian version of constructivism. But turbulent times in any area lead to strict solutions and Kandinsky, who until 1921 was surrounded

by the civil war in Russia, experienced a new transformation when he returned to Munich after much travelling.

Again his paintings bespeak a reality and reflect a state of true existence, just as they had in the years from 1910 to 1914. For Kandinsky the severe mode of the twenties was not a limiting scheme, since he recreated it from work to work without even eliminating humor in the process.

Only in Paris did he experience a loosening of the strict style, thus entering the phase which was not only the final chord but also a new blueprint.

The Parisian epoch lasted only about ten years—years of uncertainty over which the catastrophe of 1939 cast its long shadow. But Kandinsky, having come from Hitler's Germany, felt himself freed. All ballast fell away from him when he came to Paris at the end of 1933 and, at the age of 67, he began a new period with the same *élan* he had brought to the epoch of the *Blaue Reiter* and the Bauhaus. The first picture painted in Paris is called *Start*.

Kandinsky himself found the paintings of the last stage a synthesis of mind and heart, of rules and intuition, of many profound experiences. What he himself did not feel, but what his friends found, was the Russian-Asiatic splendor of color in this late work. He had never forgotten the bells of Moscow, and he suddenly remembered that his family had come from distant Siberia to Moscow. The mixing of sand with pigment made his colors more precious and at times gave the pictures the character of Chinese silk embroidery. They are neither cool nor tragic; instead, they are serene, reflective, and sometimes even other-worldly, although Kandinsky thought not of death but of the future until his last days. A painting like *Dominant Curve* (1936) is one of the richest conceptions of the Parisian period, a painting of baroque fullness.

Occasionally one thinks one can recognize concrete forms in Kandinsky's ornamental arabesques and zoological forms; one thinks of the Asiatic Animal Style and of the fish-bird motif. Perhaps the painter was not unconscious of these things—in old age, memories of forgotten things often re-emerge. Sometimes Kandinsky himself thought of concrete forms, for example, when in a painting entitled by him *One Figure Among Others* (1939), he utilizes a dance scene with a "figure" raised up high, as well as purely abstract elements.

His vigor did not diminish in the last years of life, and the paintings become ever more pellucid, polyphonic, multi-dimensioned. Their wisdom comes from uncontrollable depths, so we cannot even begin to grasp their full meaning. However, when in Kandinsky's last painting *Tempered Élan* (1944), a figuration in the upper left appears not unlike an angel, we do not want to digress into the literally religious but we must—at least—recognize the spirituality of such a conception. Throughout his whole life Kandinsky wanted to express "mystery through the mysterious." Here, as he approached death—the state of enhanced mystery—he succeeded in the final synthesis—of this world and the world beyond.

Kandinsky died on December 13, 1944. The Guggenheim Museum opened the first memorial exhibition in New York on March 15, 1945.

# SUPPLEMENT TO THE CATALOGUE

A. WINTER, NO. 62. 1909. Oil on board, 27¾ x 38⅛".
Signed b.l. "Kandinsky//909".
Collection: the artist, gift to the Soviet Union, 1920.
Lent by the Municipal Museum of Modern Western Art, Moscow.

B. CRINOLINES, NO. 64. 1909. Oil on canvas, 38⅛ x 50⅜".
Signed b.l. "Kandinsky 1909".
Collection: the artist, gift to the Soviet Union, 1920.
Lent by the Tretiakov Gallery, Moscow.

C. IMPROVISATION 11, NO. 102. 1910. Oil on canvas, 38⅜ x 41⅜".
Signed b.c. "Kandinsky 1910".
Collection: the artist, gift to the Soviet Union, 1920.
Lent by the Russian Museum, Leningrad.

D. THE LAKE, NO. 106. 1910. Oil on canvas, 38¼ x 42".
Signed b.l. "Kandinsky//1910".
Collection: the artist, gift to the Soviet Union, 1920.
Lent by the Tretiakov Gallery, Moscow.

E. IMPROVISATION 20, NO. 138. 1911. Oil on canvas, 37⅜ x 42½"
Signed b.r. "Kandinsky 1911".
Collection: the artist, gift to the Soviet Union, 1920.
Lent by the Municipal Museum of Modern Western Art, Moscow

F. BLACK SPOT I, NO. 153. 1912. Oil on canvas, 39¼ x 51⅝".
Signed b.l. "Kandinsky 1912".
Collection: the artist, gift to the Soviet Union, 1920.
Lent by the Russian Museum, Leningrad.

G. COMPOSITION VII, NO. 186. 1913. Oil on canvas, 78¾ x 118⅛"
Signed b.l. "Kandinsky 1913".
Collection: the artist, gift to the Soviet Union, 1920.
Lent by the Tretiakov Gallery, Moscow.

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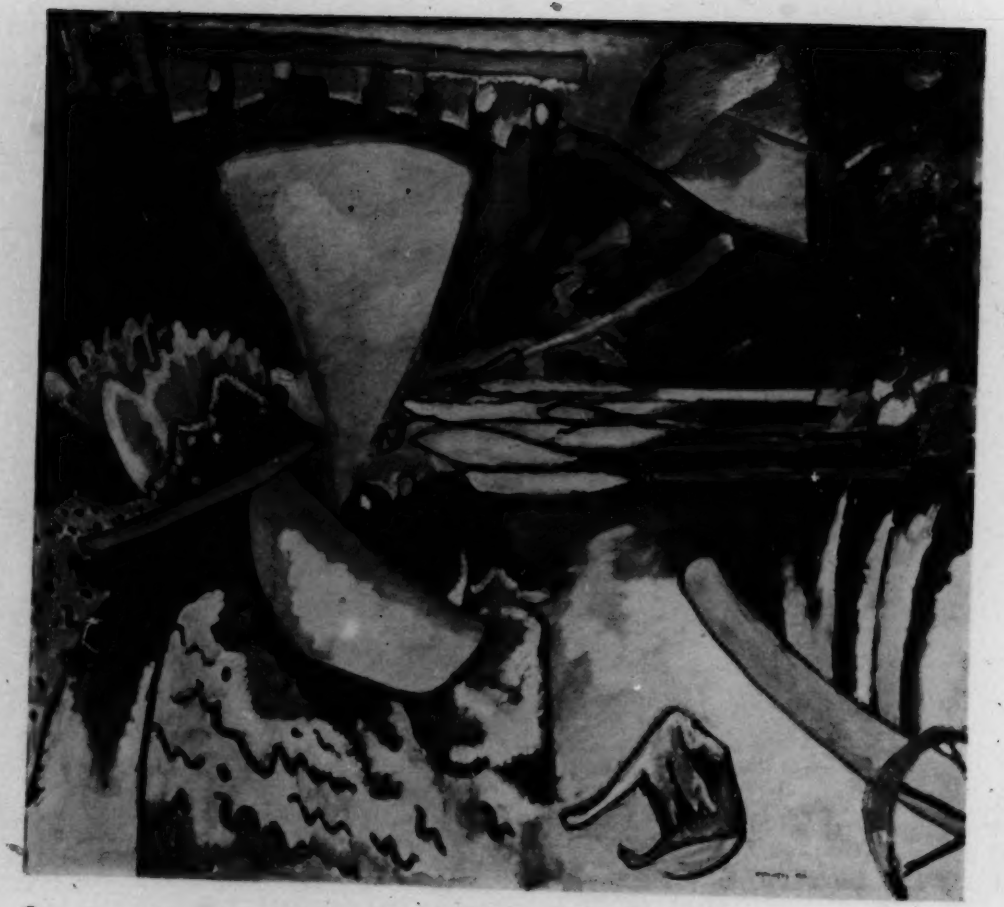
*B*



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